Oklahoma Chess Monthly

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Chess News and Chess History for Oklahoma

Jerry Spann

In This Issue:

• Story Number One
• Story Number Two
• Story Number Three
• Plus News Bites, Game of the Month, Puzzles, Top 25 List, Tournament Reports, and more.

Jerry Spann

The Forgotten "Man Who Will Never Be Forgotten"

60th Anniversary of Oklahoman Becoming President of USCF and Saving it from Bankruptcy

by Tom Braunlich

> ***"Every chess player is forever in debt to Jerry Spann. USCF is a living monument to his talent and dedication."***
> ***(Fred Cramer, USCF President 1960-63)***

Chess players around Oklahoma have heard the name Jerry Spann, but know little else. He was someone all chess players should learn about and remember.

This month is the 60th anniversary of this businessman from Oklahoma becoming USCF President, an organization he has widely been credited with rescuing from failure.

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"He was the heart and soul of American chess." (IM George Koltanowsky)

Testimonials with quotes like these highlighted examples poured onto the pages of *Chess Life* and *Chess Review* in 1968 when Spann died of cancer at only age 55. Each tribute had two themes: 1) honoring his legacy leading USCF at the national and international level, instituting many critical advances, and 2) missing him personally, for Spann was universally popular for his humor and passion.

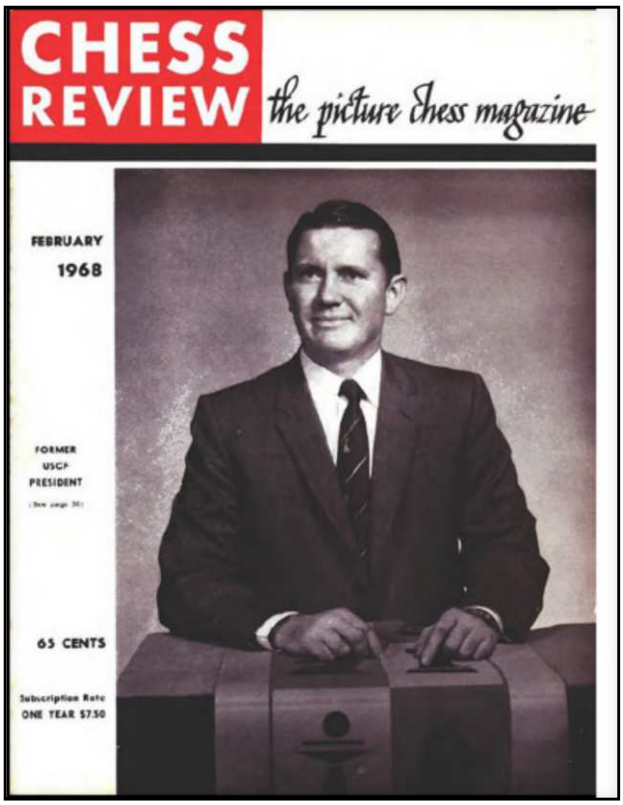
He's gone, but he'll never be forgotten in American chess." (IM Elliot Hearst)

The Jerry Spann story is one that resonates throughout US Chess even today. The issues the organization was wrestling with in the 1950s are much the same issues we still face 60 years on. This article will be in two parts:

1. Becoming USCF President 1957-1960 (this month)
2. Post-President International FIDE work after 1960 (next month)

Troubled Background

To fully understand why Spann was so loved in his day, it is necessary to appreciate the depth of the trouble the USCF was in back in the 1950s. Formed in the 1930s from earlier organizations, it had struggled through the years of World War II and the early cold war. U.S. masters, dominant internationally in the 1930s, were by the 1950s getting regularly trounced by their Soviet competitors. The USCF had only 1,000 members, and our top grandmasters were talented amateurs who lacked the support to compete at the top internationally.



'Things were quite different then," Fred Cramer wrote in his tribute to Jerry Spann in 1968. "USCF (in the mid-50s) was a veritable shambles. Membership was stagnating. Bankruptcy was well overdue. Dissention prevailed. At the local level, events, groups, and publications glistened with bitter castigations of members, masters, and organizers. Many of us wondered why we stayed. The USCF presidency was quite different too. It meant a New York business office and a Chicago editorial office, neither of which professed fealty to management, plus some one thousand names on a secret list, the members. The members: a rare few felt any obligation to USCF; a good many nourished long-standing grievances; most looked to USCF only for the handout …"

You can see for yourself this situation in the pages of *Chess Life* — which at that time was a bi-weekly newspaper with eight pages of news and games edited by Montgomery Major, an old-school journalist. His editorials each issue, which he liked to begin with quotations from classical literature (Voltaire, Chaucer, etc.), were often either critical of the USCF directors, or of

individual membership factions and their unreasonable misconceptions. His usual theme was that members demanded a lot of services from the USCF, and chess politicians promised a lot; but it was all talk. No one wanted to actually wade in and do the work to make something happen or raise money for them. The USCF was broke and simply struggled to stay solvent, unable to do all the things it would like. Even some basic things like sending a team to the Olympiad typically only happened on a shoestring thanks to individual financial contributions from some wealthy members; and sometimes they didn't even manage that.

Furthermore, some individual western states felt underserved by USCF, especially California, and had their own competing organizations that were only loosely part of the federation. California had its own monthly publication of chess news. Also the Pacific Northwest states (Oregon, Washington, Idaho) had their own monthly magazine and even their own rating system.

Besides Montgomery Major, the USCF's only employee was Kenneth Harkness, the unsung hero of the 1950s. He instituted the new ELO rating system, although in a weak early form insisted on by the leadership, and he compiled the first official rulebook for tournament laws and practices (upon which our current rulebook is still based). He did the ratings by hand, published the list every six months, and would get grief about it when it was late; and this wasn't even part of his official job as business manager! He did institute some reforms in 1953 that at least allowed the USCF to break even financially every year; but was not able to pay off its debts or have any money left over to provide more than basic member services.

All of this led to deep dissatisfaction and pessimism about the future of the USCF. This was the dark situation into which Jerry Spann stepped in 1956.

'Spannshine' Dawns

Jerry Spann's background was classic all-American. Born in 1912 in North Carolina, he went to the University of Southern California on a football scholarship and played with the Trojans, where he became a life-long friend of John Wayne (also a football and chess player). He served as a Lt. Commander in the Navy (aviation branch) during World War II, where he met his wife Alice. They settled after the war in Norman, Oklahoma. A natural salesman, he became part-owner in many businesses including Bissell Builder Supply, a construction products company, and the Roto-Swing Door company, which he described a revolutionary design of revolving door.

Jerry with wife Alice during World War II.

A solid amateur player (described by D. Ballard as "about 1750 strength"), by the mid-1950s he had become involved as an organizer of tournaments on the state level. Spann longed at this time to put Oklahoma on the chess map, and this he did in 1956 by organizing a successful bid to host the U.S. Open in Oklahoma City.

This U.S. Open was quite successful, directed by Spann's friend IM George Koltanowsky (and featured the national chess debut of a young Bobby Fischer). Since the annual meeting was held with the U.S. Open, Spann got drafted by USCF leaders to join committees, and became

Top 25 Active Oklahoma Players				
	Player	This Month	Change +/-	
1	Advait Patel	2520	13	
2	Daniel Ng	2273	0	
3	Howard Zhong	2235	-6	
4	Mark Hulsey	2221	0	
5	Tom Braunlich	2203	0	
6	Sergey Galant	2203	0	
7	Tom Amburn	2200	0	
8	Chibuzo C Ilonze	2178	0	
9	David Zelnick	2154	0	
10	Joshua Alexander	2142	0	
11	Jamal I. El Chamieh	2124	0	
12	Anthony Paolercio	2121	0	
13	Ryan Farell	2089	0	
14	Chuck Johnson	2087	0	
15	John Cope	2084	0	
16	Tom Patton	2080	0	
17	Michael Nugent	2077	0	
18	James Tyner	2074	0	
19	Veronika Zilajeva	2071	+1	
20	David Luscomb	2068	0	
21	Charles D Unruh	2062	0	
22	Matt Dalthorp	2052	0	
23	Alan Islas	2024	0	
24	Joe Dean Veal	2021	0	
25	Charles M Unruh	2005	0	

Player of the Month

Advait Patel

Wins the Kansas Open, ties for 1st in the Blitz tournaey, and 2nd in the Bughouse. Not a bad weekend.

chairman of the committee to nominate the next USCF President, which would take place at the next U.S. Open in Cleveland in 1957. Although Spann said there were 11 nominees for the job — one of which was himself — none of the other 10 wanted to deal with the USCF's disarray, so by default it was Spann who ended up getting the nod and becoming directly involved in politics a lot faster than he had thought he would.

> "He had nothing to gain from this job, this oversized headache that nobody wanted." (Fred Cramer)

Spann began his term of office by emphasizing the need for harmony and cooperation, and rolling up sleeves to do hard work. Editor Montgomery Major of *Chess Life* was not impressed, having heard such words from chess politicians so many times before, and thus proceeded to complete his resignation in a rather bitter fashion. But he gave up too soon, as the USCF was soon to be transformed as Jerry Spann proved himself to be the "real deal" leader it needed.

Spann's Method of Leadership

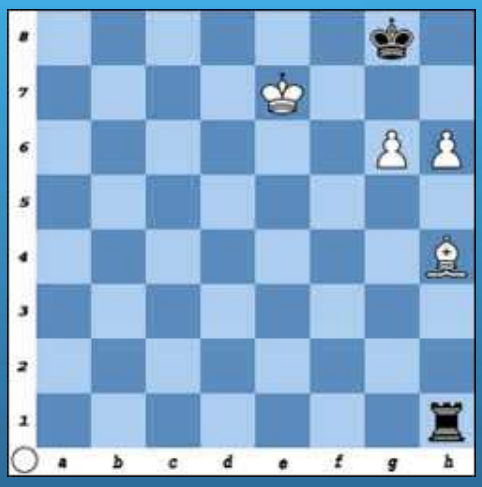
Spann's approach to the job was unique and perfect for the time. He himself described it using two different analogies:

1) **The Football Analogy —** Not only was Spann a football player, but he was friends with the legendary coach Bud Wilkinson (a neighbor of his in Norman, Oklahoma, home of OU). Wilkinson was the most famous coach of his day, leading the OU Sooners to five national championships in the 1950s.

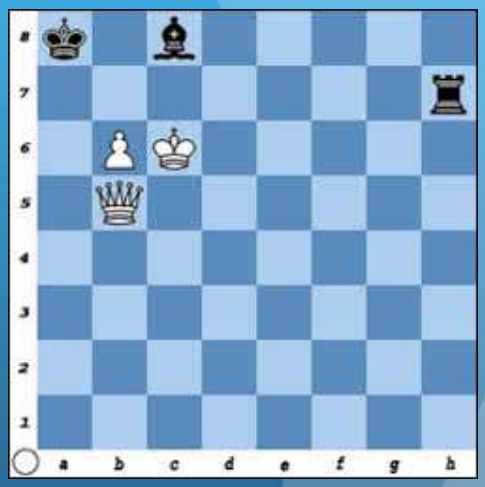
   "Bud Wilkinson's teams win the National Title year after year," Spann said, "because he does the best job of inculcating character and teamwork; all his boys rate consistently high in their

PUZZLES

Answers Next Page



White to move and win. (Easy)



White to move and win. (Difficult)

studies. In organized chess there is a lamentable lack of both integrity and teamwork, which the new administration hopes to inspire."

2) **Modern Business Analogy —** Drawing on his skills as a businessman, Spann crafted his plan in that mold.

"Briefly our plan is of the sales campaign type. We will have territories, quotas, reports, sales meetings, pep meetings, promotions of various kinds and all the trappings commonly employed by sales organizations in industry," Spann said in *Chess Review*, 1957.

"As I see the picture the primary function of the USCF is to establish a broad base of players of all ranks in all walks of life. Given a sufficiently large and solid base the pyramid of players can easily support the few masters at the apex. There is much to be done by all of us. If we work together in harmony for the common good, each in his own field, doing the things he can best do, there is no earthly reason why chess in America cannot take its rightful place as a sport and recreation on an equal plane with other pastimes in which millions of Americans are interested."

Leading from the Front

Beyond the analogies, observers of the time agreed the key features of Spann's presidency were his hard work and out-front leadership. It had been a long time sense members had anyone who was such a believer in chess and the USCF, someone working so hard, putting his time and money where his mouth is. To put it simply, Spann's obvious enthusiasm — packaged in good humor — was infectious. Slowly, he began to win people over, convincing them that the USCF could grow and prosper.

Immediately he began implementation of a highly ambitious membership drive, aiming to grow 1,000 new members immediately (the

Answers to the Puzzles

(1) Forcing through a pawn requires being willing to part with one. 1. h7+ Kg7 2. h8=Q+! Kxh8 3. Kf7! (Threat Bf6#) 3…Rf1+ (3…Rxh4 4. g7+ etc.) 4. Bf6+ Rxf6 5. Kxf6 Kg8 6. g7 and the last pawn will get through.

(2) Trying to solve this problem purely by calculation is very hard for a human. The key to solving it is to figure out what you want to achieve. Black's two pieces are unprotected. Playing a Q to g8 will fork them and win a piece, and the game. With that as the goal, all you have to do is discover a way to force the queen there. You can get there by checking with your queen from g3, which means the previous check was from a3. How to get it there? From the a3-f8 diagonal. This helps you find the sequence. 1. Qa4+ Kb8 2. Qf4+ Ka8 3. Qf8! (switching to the key diagonal with tempo by attacking the bishop). 3…Kb8 4. Qd6+ Ka8 5. Qa3+ Kb8 6. Qg3+ Ka8 and finally 7. Qg8 wins….

USCF membership at the time was under 2000). More than just encouraging people to sign up new members, the drive was structured and gave people the tools they needed, including brochures and info for new members and how to attract casual players to tournaments. Most importantly he divided the country into regions with high-profile leaders in each region (including Walter Shipman in the Northeast, who would become a pivotal figure), and within each region each state also had a membership drive chairman. The key feature of this was assigning quotas to each state and then tracking their progress monthly in the pages of *Chess Life* with regular updates and reports from the leaders, which had the effect of putting into swing a competition for each state. No state wanted to be at the bottom of the membership drive list, where they would be shamed by the public reports. All this is straight out of business school for Spann. This system proved to be very successful and was repeated with each success. Spann professed a goal of getting 20,000 new members! And everyone could tell he seriously thought he could do it.

Spann at the Beverly Hills Banquet in California, Dec 1957. (*California Chess Reporter* photo, chessdryad.com archives).

The California Speech

One of Spann's main actions during his first few months was to travel to the key state of California and earn their support for his goals. California had previously tended to go its own way and was sometimes working at cross-purposes with USCF. He spent two weeks there early in his term, dividing his time between San Francisco (and the Mechanics Chess Club) and Los Angeles and the clubs near Hollywood.

To put it simply, Spann was a hit in California and for the most part

Continued on page 12

JERRY SPANN continued…

won their cooperation and allegiance for USCF.

At a banquet in Beverly Hills with 50 influential chess backers of the region, Spann gave a "major policy speech" that was so successful the *California Chess Reporter* printed the entire speech transcript for all its members to see. This speech is available now in full on the California Chess Archives website here:
http://www.chessdryad.com/articles/ccr/12_20_57.pdf
… and makes a very interesting read even today. It explains the Jerry Spann presidency in a nutshell.

In this speech you can see Spann's delightful blend of humor and self-deprecation with his confidence, enthusiasm, and skill. If you read this short document casually you might miss its efficacy and completeness in the issues it covers. A closer study of this speech reveals the problems of the time – which still reverberate in today's USChess (and may be worth reviewing Spann's method of dealing with them).

First he begins with optimism, portraying chess to be "on the brink" and ripe for a huge growth spurt. Ongoing trends of the 1950s prosperity were creating, "a wondrous setting and atmosphere for the spread of the royal game." Further, 1957 was a key year in the Cold War with the beginning of the "Satellite Age" — the Soviet Union had just launched the first satellite to orbit the Earth, and the U.S. was shocked to find that we had fallen behind Russia in scientific advancement and technology. Strong calls were going out to greatly fortify science in schools to crank out tens of thousands additional researchers from the baby boom generation — starting an effort that did indeed pay off for the U.S. during this time and ended with American footprints on the moon. Spann implies this challenge to us was an opportunity for chess as well, given its value for educational benefits. These allusions "raised the stakes" for chess for the audience, by connecting its success with patriotism and the success of the USA in the cold war. It is hard for a reader today to appreciate how effective this rhetorical device was at the time. (Here he also briefly alludes to Bobby Fischer, who at age 14 was about to win the U.S. Championship and inspire yet more young players as part of this "on the brink" position of chess in the USA.)

Next Spann deftly alludes briefly to some very serious conflicts a few years previously between California Chess and USCF that nearly fractured the entire organization, and adroitly soothes them over in the interest of future harmony.

Thirdly, Spann brings up a major USCF issue of the 1950s, the Ratings/Membership issue. He strongly explained his opinion and that he was pushing through an official vote on it — one that would prove to be a significant advancement.

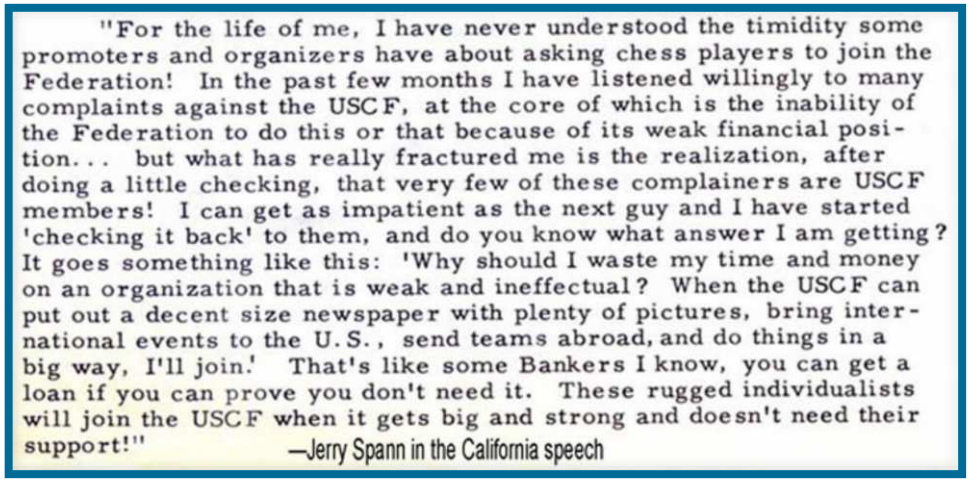
What was the Ratings/Membership issue?
Many people today mistakenly think that Jerry Spann was the first to implement the ELO rating system, but such is not the case. It was implemented some years before by Kenneth Harkness, but under rules that were a financial handicap to the USCF. At the time, tournament organizers did NOT like the idea of requiring all participants in an event to be USCF members, fearing the extra cost of the $5 annual USCF membership fee would turn newcomers or casual players away. So the system was implemented without that requirement.

Harkness every year complained that the rating list was full of non-members. Often the majority of players in tournaments were non-members, and the cost of rating them was being born by a smaller and smaller percentage of members. By the time Jerry Spann took office 75% of the rating list was non-members, and Harkness said it would

soon be 90% if something weren't done.

The result was that the rating system — perhaps the USCF's most important "product" as an organization — was not able to pay for itself and was becoming a burden. Furthermore, Harkness believed it could be a source of badly-needed profits for the USCF. Every year he would recommend to the USCF leadership changing this rule, and every year the change would get voted down.

Previous presidents had skirted the issue, but not Spann. He waded into it immediately, making a clear argument that the USCF needed to change the rules and require ALL players in a tournament to be current USCF members for the event to be rated. In the Beverly Hills speech you can see his persuasive argument for this, which nicely is respectful of the counter-arguments but makes it clear it is a change the USCF needs.



"For the life of me, I have never understood the timidity some promoters and organizers have about asking chess players to join the Federation! In the past few months I have listened willingly to many complaints against the USCF, at the core of which is the inability of the Federation to do this or that because of its weak financial position... but what has really fractured me is the realization, after doing a little checking, that very few of these complainers are USCF members! I can get as impatient as the next guy and I have started 'checking it back' to them, and do you know what answer I am getting? It goes something like this: 'Why should I waste my time and money on an organization that is weak and ineffectual? When the USCF can put out a decent size newspaper with plenty of pictures, bring international events to the U.S., send teams abroad, and do things in a big way, I'll join.' That's like some Bankers I know, you can get a loan if you can prove you don't need it. These rugged individualists will join the USCF when it gets big and strong and doesn't need their support!"

—Jerry Spann in the California speech

The rule was soon changed, and it proved to be one turning point for the USCF. The rating system became profitable and a key ingredient in the USCF's resurgence, and continues so to this day.

The "Psychic Block" — Finally Spann ends the California speech by alluding to his main adversary to promoting chess in the USA — the idea among many players that chess is "only" a game and should not be taken seriously, so little money should be spent on it. Spann called it the "Psychic Block" and identified it as one of his main enemies. His clever argument humorously demolished the idea that chess is not a worthy hobby. He identified chess as a real sport, as well as called out the hypocritical approach of some people to the game, people who balked over 50 cents extra for fees or dues while turning around and spending 10 times as much on the tennis court or golf course.

Spann believe chess was a sport, and believed that promoting master-level chess and helping our top players to be able to become professionals was one of the most important functions of the USCF. He put participation in international events near the top of his mission list every year, and made sure the USCF sent teams to international competitions, often leading them himself and raising money on the side to finance it. During his first few months in office the US hosted its first major international tournament in ages (Dallas, 1957; with players like Larsen, Gligoric, Najdorf, and Benko), and raised funds to send a team to the Olympiad in 1958 (they failed to send a team the previous time).

And Spann put his money where his mouth is as well, often financing his own trips and expenses as president, and sometimes bolstering prize funds out of his own pocket (which unfortunately often still happens even today for many of our top USCF directors).

'From Watcher to Worker'

Spann traveled the country and spread his enthusiasm for chess like Johnny Appleseed to every corner. The membership drive system Spann set up funneled new

volunteers into whatever action they could do, and the member roster started growing quickly.

Marshall Roland dubbed the Jerry Spann era "Spannshine."

"I among others changed from watcher to worker," Fred Cramer said. "And on this I clearly know why: seeing Jerry devote talent and resources so whole-heartedly, seeing him do far more than we ever expected of a volunteer USCF leader, I quite simply felt that I belonged at his side, that I could help too, that our objective was worthwhile and that at long last seemed attainable. … Before us was the rare and precious phenomenon of leadership, leadership by example, vigorous and effective."

This included Oklahomans. For example, our perennial state champion, Bela Rozsa (head of the music department at The University of Tulsa) found the time to volunteer and was for a time a member at large of the USCF board.

Of course, it didn't hurt that trends had finally switched to be in favor of chess in the USA after a long drought. The country was prosperous, and the excitement of the young teenager phenomenon Bobby Fischer was inspiring many kids (the first Fischer boom, followed by a much bigger one in 1972).

1957-1960 Results

The results of Spann's three-year term, however, speak to more than just good timing:

- The USCF player base, starting under 2,000, picked up 10,000 new members.
- The USCF annual income "went from four figures to six" (Fred Cramer) and the USCF was back on relatively sound financial footing.
- The rating system was "fixed" and now profitable, the centerpiece USCF benefit.
- International tournament participation had been largely restored (although still always remained somewhat conditional each time around over the years)
- A new professional management was in place, and the future looked bright for USCF.

Though the USCF still had a long way to go, and still even today faces many of the same issues, Spann had succeeded in turning it around and showing there existed for it a stable path. True, that path is still dependent on people – the volunteer chess fans who do make that transition "from watcher to worker." Continued success over the past 60 years has been spotty as a result, and has led to new challenges and crises to overcome (as for example the mess our own Jim Berry had to lead us through when he became USCF President 2009-2011).

Next Month we will examine Spann's other great Legacy – using his contacts to improve USCF in international chess and bring top-flight chess to the USA, seeding the USCF's future through his ardent followers Fred Cramer and Ed Edmondson (who led us into the 1972 Fischer boom) — while at the same time running events in Oklahoma and developing protégés here, indeed shaping chess in Oklahoma to this day.

Sources: *Chess Life* annuals 1953-1960, *Chess Review* annual 1957, chessdryad.com Chess Archives (California), *"Jerry Spann, an Oklahoma Chess Legacy," Oklahoma Chess Quarterly*, June 200, by Frank Berry, internet sources.